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ABSTRACT

This essay by the president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York (reprinted from the 1998 annual report) opens by noting that the year 1999 marks the 100th anniversary of Andrew Carnegie's support for the planning and development of 65 branch libraries of the New York Public Library System, a gift that came to more than $5.2 million. Discussion then moves to the role and significance of libraries and the importance of books and reading. A brief history, beginning with the first "libraries" in Mesopotamia, is then outlined. The significance of Carnegie's gifts for the development of American libraries is noted, and highlights are given of Carnegie Corporation's grants for public and academic library development and services and for training of librarians. The essay concludes with a profile of the library today and the potential benefits of new technologies, and notes that Carnegie Corporation funds, to be negotiated, will be used for the promotion of literacy, the preservation of texts, and the improvement of children's library services. (AEF)

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Libraries and Andrew Carnegie's Challenge

Vartan Gregorian

Libraries and Andrew Carnegie's Challenge

As New York City concludes the celebration of its first 100 years of incorporation, Carnegie Corporation plans to mark another centennial year for the city, that of Andrew Carnegie's remarkable gift to New York to establish sixty-five branch libraries. This gift, by far the largest of any he made for library development, came to more than $5.2 million around the turn of the twentieth century, offering vigorous testimony to his faith in the future of this great metropolis. While the city offered the sites and promised to maintain the libraries, Carnegie's money paid for the buildings. Carnegie's benefaction brought to the doorstep of a largely immigrant population not only the means for self-education and enlightenment, but opportunity for understanding our democracy, for the study of English, for instruction in new skills, for the enjoyment of community, for the exercise of the imagination, and for the pleasure of contemplation and silence. As one who was once a youth fresh off the plane from Lebanon, whose first stop in New York was the New York Public Library, and who later, as head of this same institution, made deep study of it, I can state unequivocally that the New York public library system, in which Carnegie played such a pivotal role, has profoundly affected the lives of millions of grateful people.

Carnegie, more than most, understood the value of libraries as the primary institution for the cultivation of the mind. To Carnegie the library symbolized the unity and summit of all knowledge, the bones, the binding sinews, the flesh and heart of any society that could call itself strong. No city could sustain progress without a great public library — and not just as a font of knowledge for scholars, but as a creation for and of the people, free and accessible to all. To him it was no exaggeration to say that the public library "outranks any other one thing that a community can do to help its people."

A Living Institution

Today the existence of libraries in our midst is so much taken for granted that their significance as living institutions is almost lost to us. Why are libraries important, and why will they ever be so? I will attempt an answer — one that I hope can give fresh meaning to the word "library." Libraries contain the heritage of humanity: the record of its triumphs and failures, its intellectual, scientific, and artistic achievements, and its collective memory. They are a source of knowledge, scholarship, and wisdom. They are an institution, withal, where the left and the right, God and the Devil, are together classified and retained, in order

to teach us what to emulate and what not to repeat. Libraries are, in short, the mirror held up to the face of humankind, the diary of the human race.

Libraries are not only repositories of past human endeavor, they are instruments of civilization. They provide tools for learning, understanding, and progress. They are the wellspring of action, a laboratory of human aspiration, a window to the future. They are a source of self-renewal, intellectual growth, and hope. In this land and everywhere on earth, they are a medium of progress, autonomy, empowerment, independence, and self-determination. They have always provided, and I would suggest always will provide, place and space for imaginative re-creation, for imaginative rebirth.

More than this, the library is the University of Universities, the symbol of our universal community, of the unity of all knowledge, of the commonwealth of learning. It is the only true and free university there is. In this university there are no entrance examinations, no subsequent examinations, no diplomas, no graduations. Ralph Waldo Emerson had it right when he called the library the People's University. Thomas Carlyle, too, called it the True University or The House of Intellect. By the same token, no university in the world has ever risen to greatness without having a corresponding great library, and no university is greater than its library.

Above all else, the library constitutes an act of faith in the continuity of life. It represents — embodies — the spirit of humanity in all ages. The library is not, therefore, an ossified institution or a historical relic. Together with the museum, the library is the DNA of our culture. Cemeteries do not provide earthly immortality to men and women or preserve their memories; libraries and museums do.

The historian Joseph Frazier Wall has written in his biography of Andrew Carnegie that it is important for children in their early years to acquire a sense of the continuity of time, for it is only in the realization that the verb "to live" has past, present, and future tenses that they successfully establish their own identity, their own place in the complex world of which they find themselves a part. Where better to attain the sense of the continuity of time than in a library? I savored past, present, and future during my boyhood in the Armenian public library of my hometown in Tabriz, Iran. My first glimpse of life beyond my neighborhood was through that library. Andrew Carnegie experienced the three tenses in the lending library that his father helped establish in his birthplace of Dunfermline, Scotland. His formal education ended on his arrival in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, at age twelve, but he pursued his self-education first in the private library of a local benefactor, where he learned Shakespeare by heart, studied the Renaissance artists, and honed a memory that was to serve him superbly all his business life.

Books and Reading

The late Jorge Luis Borges, one of the world's great contemporary writers and himself a former librarian, paid a moving tribute to the book: "Down through the ages, Man has imagined and forged no end of tools. He has created the key, a tiny metal rod that allows a person to enter an enormous palace. He has created the sword and the plowshare, extensions of the arm of the man who uses them. He has created the telescope, which has enabled him to investigate the firmament on high." But it is the book, Borges observed, that is "a worldly extension of his imagination and his memory." He went on to say, "I am unable to imagine a world without books.... Now, as always, the unstable and precious world may pass away. Only books, which are the best memory of our species, can save it."

John Milton wrote that "books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are." Not only do they bestow knowledge and power upon the reader, but they offer solace, distraction, and delight to the spiritually wounded and whole alike. A book needs no defense. Its spokespersons come and go; its readers live and die; what remains constant is the book.

The act of reading is universal, transcending time and space. Reading is a source of renewal. What is renewed is the imagination, which takes us to points

beyond reach of the everyday. Reading forces us to see the ways we would be poorer, what kinds of experience we would be missing, and what strengths we would lack if we did not read. Because what we do when we read is indeed very much more complex than the getting of new facts. The qualities we would miss by not reading (active, imaginative collaboration and critical distance) have implications for what a library is and what it ought to be and ought to do.

Reading and writing are not merely cosmetic skills, comparable to good manners. The European and English philosophical traditions have taught us that language and thought are inseparable. Reading and writing are the essence of thinking. In a memorable essay on the decay of language, George Orwell, of *1984* fame, observed that, when we begin to prefer the vague to the exact, we reduce the range of our consciousness. Eventually, he predicted, we will not know, and then we will not care. The late A. Bartlett Giamatti, former president of Yale University, eloquently summed it up, "There can be no transmission of values, no sharing of perspectives on human nature; no common good aggregated from the shared convictions of disparate individuals, no unique design in words imposed on chaos, or consciousness: there can be no legitimate aesthetic or intellectual or civic gratification alone for literary study, without the primary recognition that the *language* [italics mine], its defense, nurture, and dignity, is our first and our special responsibility. For ours is a culture radically imbued with logocentricity, with the ancient, enduring, and finally numinous awe of writing and what is written."

Throughout history, the relationship between the book, as container of information and knowledge and insight, and the reader — the receiver — has been dialectical, dynamic, and collaborative; it is not passive but constructive. Reading always, at once, entails the effort to comprehend and the effort to incorporate; it involves in its essence a process of digestion. Rabelais, during the epoch of the Renaissance, advised the reader of his *Pantagruel* to "eat the book." In other words, books cannot nourish or even be said to exist until they are digested. "We are of the ruminating kind," wrote John Locke late in his life, "and it is not enough to cram ourselves with a great load of collections. Unless we chew them over again, they will not give us strength and nourishment."

It is not wholly accurate to say one *reads* a book; one can only *reread* it. A good reader, an active reader, a creative reader, is thus a rereader. The reader completes a job only begun by an author. There are modern authors who take great pains to recall our original responsibility as readers. For we make the book as the book makes us.

The other aspect of the collaboration between the book and the reader is its intimacy, its privacy. We must not forget that pleasure, discretion, silence, and creative solitude are the primary aspects of a life of reading, its most tangible justification and its most immediate reward. This solitude may appear now as an unaffordable luxury, and yet any book creates for its reader "a place elsewhere." A person reading is a person suspended between the immediate and the timeless. This suspension serves a purpose that has little to do with escape from "the real world" — the sin avid readers are most commonly accused of. Being able to transcend the limitations of time and space oneself allows not only the renewal of one's imagination but also the development of one's mind. Whether it is a work of fiction or a work of science, a book appeals first of all to the mind.

Virginia Woolf, in an essay on reading, concludes: "I have sometimes dreamt, at least, that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards — their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble — the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy, when He sees us coming with our books under our arms, 'Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading.'" If I were to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, I would substitute the following lines. "Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They built libraries, they loved libraries, they were readers."

A Short History

Libraries are as old as civilization, the object of pride, envy, and sometimes senseless destruction throughout the ages. Between the clay tablets of Babylon and the computers of a modern library stretch more than 5,000 years of man's and woman's insatiable desire to ensure their immortality through the written word, to transmit the fruits of culture and civilization, and to share memory, experience, wisdom, fantasy, and longing with the whole of humankind and with future generations.

The first "libraries" in Mesopotamia contained clay tablets stamped with wedge-shaped marks and baked in the sun. Tens of thousands of them are now stored in museums, many still awaiting translation. These early collections included myths, commercial records, and documents of state that were housed in the temple under the custody of the priest. There were "libraries" of a sort in ancient Greece. Around 300 B.C., Ptolemy I built the renowned library at Alexandria, Egypt, which was destroyed in the seventh century A.D.

The Book of Maccabees in the Old Testament refers to a treasury of books — implying the kind of "library" that may have been kept in the Holy Temple. According to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the ascetic Jews who lived in Qumran near the Dead Sea maintained a "library."

In Rome, the Bibliotheca Ulpia, established around 100 A.D., continued until the fifth century, serving as the Public Record Office of Rome. By the fourth century A.D., Rome, reportedly, had some twenty-eight public "libraries."

Following the advent of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran singled out Jews and Christians as "People of the Book." In the Islamic realm from the ninth century on, there were libraries in Baghdad, Cairo, and Alexandria. The Muslims built a network of public libraries in Toledo, Cordoba, and Granada.

With the emergence of medieval institutions of higher learning in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, scholarly collections and libraries arose in the Vatican, the Sorbonne, Oxford, Prague, and Heidelberg, among the most important. In the next two centuries, during the Renaissance and the Reformation, the Escorial of Madrid, the Herzog August Bibliothek at Wolfenbuttel, the Library of Uppsala University, and the State Library of Prussia came into being.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the emergence of the great research and national libraries of England — Corpus Christi College at Cambridge, the Bodleian Library at Oxford, the British Museum — and of France, the Germanies, Austria, and Russia.

The rise of libraries in America — public, university research, and privately endowed — is an extraordinary phenomenon. No other nation has made available both to the scholarly community and to the general public such an array of libraries. This has been possible thanks to the generosity of public and private funds and the efforts of bibliophiles, private collectors, and philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie as well as to the municipalities that braved objection to the dedication of tax money for library support.

The early "social libraries" had their beginnings in New England in the fourth decade of the eighteenth century, and their golden age of expansion occurred between 1790 and 1850. Based on the ability of the user to pay for the service, they formed the foundation for the first true public libraries in America. Massachusetts, in 1848, was the first state to pass an act authorizing one of its cities, Boston, to levy a tax for the establishment of a free public library service. Other states were soon to follow. By 1896, twenty-nine of the then forty-five states and the District of Columbia had such laws in effect.

The impetus for this efflorescence was the popular Enlightenment idea that all people are endowed with unlimited rational capacity and that everyone possesses a natural right to knowledge. The urge for self-improvement was linked with the idea of progress, which in turn spurred the growth of free public education. Industrialization, urbanization, and rising prosperity were still other developments influencing public library growth. The forward march of science and technology in the late nineteenth century and increasing specialization in occupations placed further emphasis

on reading for self-improvement. Public libraries were increasingly hailed as agencies for the benefit and improvement of all.

Over the course of this century, the library has grown to occupy a central role in our democratic society. Not only is it a critical component of the free exchange of information, which lies at the heart of our democracy, in both the actual and symbolic sense, the library in America is the guardian of freedom of thought and freedom of choice and a bulwark against manipulation by demagogues. Hence, it constitutes the finest symbol of the First Amendment of our Constitution. What would be the result of a political system if a majority of the people were ignorant of their past and of the ideals, traditions, and purposes of our democracy? "A nation that expects to be ignorant and free," wrote Thomas Jefferson in a letter to Charles Yancy in 1816, "expects what never was and never will be."

Andrew Carnegie's Legacy

Andrew Carnegie never forgot the time when as a boy he had been unable to pay the subscription fee of $2 a year to borrow books from one of the country's first public libraries. Public, he learned, does not always mean free. Though, by 1887, twenty-five states had passed public library enabling laws, laws alone were not enough to bring those libraries into existence. By 1896 there were still only 971 public libraries in the United States having 1,000 volumes or more. Out of his own experience — the measure by which he judged the worth of almost everything — Carnegie determined to make free library services available to all who needed and wanted them. His great interest was not in library buildings as such but in the opportunities that circulating libraries afforded men and women, young, old, and in-between, for knowledge and understanding. "Only in popular education," he asseverated, "can man erect the structure of an enduring civilization." Beginning in 1886, he used much of his personal fortune to establish free public libraries throughout America. In all, he spent $56 million to create 1,681 public libraries in nearly as many U.S. communities and 828 libraries in other parts of the English-speaking world. Thirty-four big towns and cities received at least a main building and one or more branches, for a total of 138 libraries. The majority of the 1,349 other communities that received only one building were small towns.

The significance of Andrew Carnegie's gifts for the development of libraries in America can scarcely be overestimated. According to two distinguished historians, Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, the most effective impetus to the public library movement in the United States did not come from official sources or from public demand but from Andrew Carnegie's generosity. This generosity was, in turn, the result of Carnegie's genuine passion for education, his persuasion that the public library was the most democratic of all roads to learning, and his mindfulness of the debt he owed to books and the love he felt for them. Another scholar, Harold Underwood Faulkner, went further, crediting Carnegie with being the greatest single incentive to library growth in the United States.

The scope of Carnegie Corporation's subsequent grants for public and academic library development and services and for training of librarians cannot be encompassed in these pages, but a few highlights will serve. Beginning in 1926, the foundation embarked on a large-scale expansion of its library program aimed mainly at strengthening the library profession but also at the enhancement of central services. In these efforts, the Corporation spent an average of about $830,000 a year until 1941. The American Library Association, founded in 1876, received an endowment of $100,000 from Andrew Carnegie in 1902, general support from the Corporation during the 1920s, $2 million in endowment in 1926, and numerous other grants for special purposes since then. The first graduate library school was established on the foundation's initiative at the University of Chicago.

Rural library services were greatly enhanced under Corporation grants in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the South. As to academic libraries, between 1930 and 1943 the Corporation appropriated

nearly $2.5 million to more than 200 liberal arts colleges in a series of grants for library development and services and for the purchase of books for undergraduate reading. The Corporation began promoting the concept of free library services in sub-Saharan Africa in 1928. The majority of the funds went to the central State Library of South Africa, which stimulated the development of free library services throughout the Union. Substantial grants also went for the development of libraries, the purchase of books, and training in the Gambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and other Commonwealth African countries. The Library of Congress received a $200,000 grant in 1959 to establish an Africana unit.

After World War II, the Corporation's support for individual public and academic libraries (except for Africa) began to abate. More emphasis was placed on grants for central services provided by the American Library Association, the Association of Research Libraries, the Library of Congress, and other organizations and for the use of new technologies and equipment to facilitate library use. A $750,000 grant was given toward the building and equipment of a joint library in Chicago for twelve Midwestern universities. In the past twenty-five years, Corporation support for libraries has been confined to a few grants for specific purposes including, most recently, those to establish electronic information systems in research institution libraries in Africa.

Altogether, it seems fair to say that Andrew Carnegie and Carnegie Corporation have been associated in the past with nearly every major development in library services in the United States and in most parts of the Commonwealth.

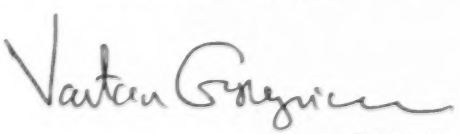
Carnegie's Library Gift to New York

I began by noting that the year 1999 marks the 100th anniversary of Andrew Carnegie's support for the planning and development of sixty-five branch libraries of the New York Public Library system. A small payment was made on December 8, 1899, with a full $5.2 million awarded on December 4, 1901, representing an average operating cost of about $80,000 per branch.

The year 1999 finds public libraries in a very different situation from a century ago, when their potential was just beginning to be appreciated by ordinary Americans. Today they are mature institutions numbering more than 8,000. In the main these libraries have shown remarkable resilience in the face of repeated challenges to their viability and a remarkable ability to transform themselves to meet changing needs. They continue to adapt to one of the most astonishing shifts in the technology of communication ever to take place: the rapidly spreading use of networked computers bringing vast amounts of information (and misinformation) directly to the home, school, and office. The breathtaking pace of these developments has led some proponents of the Internet to wonder whether brick-and-mortar libraries are any longer relevant. Never fear. Libraries have always found a way to fit new media to their fundamental purposes, bringing information and knowledge to the user in a multiplicity of ways, from radio to slides to film to television to the computer to CD-ROMs to the World Wide Web, while remaining the essential place for the book. No experience of reading online, in any case, will ever replace the visceral excitement of holding a book in hand and experiencing its totemic power; no technology can yet match the convenience of a book's portability and easy proximity; no electronic medium can provide the intimacy of private communion or collaboration between the reader and the book. It is dismaying to hear of some students conducting all their research online these days, for no search engine as yet can replace the library or the experts within it, whose role it is in this age of knowledge fragmentation and information overload to distill the best, to separate fact from opinion, to provide a structure for knowledge.

The new technologies stand to deliver unheard-of benefits to seekers of information, instruction, knowledge, and community, but integrating these tools into the historical identity of the library and, conversely, accommodating the library's traditional organizational and social structures to these media will take time. I am optimistic about the possibility of a lively coexistence between the library and the computer, and between the computer and the book, provided that public access is protected, that services remain free to one and all, and that learning is not permitted to become an isolated, isolating experience but part of a community of learning.

Which brings me to the question of how Carnegie Corporation can assist in the transformations under way in public library systems, so that they become even more visible and vital institutions among the people they serve. How can libraries be helped to integrate the new tools of communication into their services and operations without jeopardizing their traditional functions? What will induce states and localities to give libraries and books, among our most important cultural artifacts, and reading more vigorous public support? Certainly one place to start is to revitalize the concept of what a library is, what a book is, what reading is, as I have tried to do in these brief pages, and then to determine the place of technology in promoting the unity of knowledge. The emphasis on historical preservation in the White House's millennium initiative overlaps with the centennial celebrations in New York. The conjunction of these events offers Carnegie Corporation a unique opportunity to remember Andrew Carnegie, "the Patron Saint of American Public Libraries," with a series of one-time-only gifts to selected libraries. The funds, to be negotiated, will be used for the promotion of literacy, the preservation of texts, and the improvement of children's library services — in a word, reading.



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Mail: To have information sent to you, write to the Corporation, at 437 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10022, or telephone (212) 207-6289 (Carnegie information center voice mail). The information will be sent by first class mail within one week of receipt of the request.

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The Carnegie Philanthropies

Andrew Carnegie was born in Scotland in 1835. He came to the United States with his family in 1848 and went to work as a bobbin boy in a cotton mill. After a succession of jobs with Western Union and the Pennsylvania Railroad, he eventually resigned to establish his own business enterprises and, finally, the Carnegie Steel Company, which launched the huge steel industry in Pittsburgh. At the age of 65, he sold the company and devoted the rest of his life to writing, including his autobiography, and to philanthropic activities, intending to give away $300 million. He gave away $311 million.

Gifts to hundreds of communities in the English-speaking world helped to make his idea of the free public library as the people's university a reality. In all, 2,509 libraries were built with Carnegie funds. His endowment of the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh brought important educational and cultural benefits to the community in which he made his fortune. From experience he knew the importance of science applied to commerce and industry, and he provided for technical training through the Carnegie Institute of Technology. By establishing the Carnegie Institution of Washington, he helped to stimulate the growth of knowledge through providing facilities for basic research in science.

Mr. Carnegie set up the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland to assist needy students and to promote research in science, medicine, and the humanities. For the betterment of social conditions in his native town of Dunfermline, Scotland, he set up the Carnegie Dunfermline Trust. To improve the well-being of the people of Great Britain and Ireland, he established the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust.

In the United States, he created The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching primarily as a pension fund for college teachers and also to promote the cause of higher education. To work for the abolition of war, he established the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. To recognize heroism in the peaceful walks of life as being as worthy as valor in battle, he created funds in the United States, the United Kingdom, and nine European countries to make awards for acts of heroism. In contributing to the construction of the Peace Palace at The Hague, the Pan American Union Building in Washington, and the Central American Court of Justice in Costa Rica, he further expressed his belief in arbitration and conciliation as substitutes for war.

In 1911, having worked steadily at his task of giving away one of the world's great fortunes, Mr. Carnegie created Carnegie Corporation of New York, a separate foundation as large as all his other trusts combined.

Each of the Carnegie agencies has its own funds and trustees and each is independently managed.